

Supporting Daily Transitions: Script

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Topic 0: Introduction to Module

Hi, welcome to this module on Supporting Daily Transitions, and thank you for supporting SpectrumTeaching.org. For children with autism spectrum disorder, and other special needs, transitioning between activities, classes, and breaks can be a common area of difficulty. Through the next 7 videos, we will cover some reasons why transitions are difficult, utilizing visual aids and communication to help with this, as well as expectation management.

During this module, it is important to remember that autism spectrum disorder exists on a broad spectrum, and each individual experiences challenges differently. Only by understanding the individual, can we determine which strategies presented through this module will be appropriate. Our goal is not to provide perfect solutions to your unique situation, but instead provide you with the foundation and basic tools necessary to work with and support your students. Supporting children with ASD often requires trial and error, so be persistent!

We hope you enjoy this module, and in the next video we will begin with discussing these challenges in transitions in -depth.

Topic 1: Challenges with Transitions

In this video, we will discuss why children with Autism Spectrum Disorder may struggle with transitions. Before we focus on autism, we should also realize that many people struggle with transitions. People often prefer habit and routine, and when we break that, it can make us uncomfortable. Many children may have less obvious behavioural manifestations of this, such as whining, complaining, or sulking. However, for children with developmental disorders, this stress may be augmented, which may lead to more challenging behaviours.

What might these difficulties with transitions look like? Like ASD, the challenges associated with transitions can present in a wide range of ways. This includes whining, refusal to cooperate, and engaging in distraction, up to aggression, screaming, and outbursts. These are usually emotional responses and it is important to understand the individual to best assist each student.

Why do these occur? It is impossible to pin down an exact reason that applies to all individuals on the autism spectrum, but we can discuss some common issues that can influence these difficulties. From this, we can look into three reasons that may be applicable to an individual.

The first is that children with ASD often prefer routine, and may follow a strict mental schedule. In a world that can be already confusing and overwhelming, everyday structure and predictability can help provide comfort for these students. Changing tasks without warning or mental preparation can cause a deviation from this internal schedule, leading to feelings of stress. Some have described this almost as mental inflexibility. For some individuals, breaking routine can feel like being thrown into a world of uncertainty and can be extremely overwhelming. Sometimes the mental schedules that individuals rely on are based on predictive variables that may not be the ones we usually rely on. For example, a child may



associate going to school with mom wearing work shoes, so if she wears different shoes that are usually associated with the weekend, that may confuse the child.

These feelings may then manifest themselves as challenging behaviours, which may be an effort to resist change or simply a difficulty in handling their own emotions.

Additional associated challenges, such as anxiety or sensory processing issues, can make these situations even more stressful. For example, for children who experience sensory challenges, this state of increased stress may make them more prone to sensory overload. This may only compound the issue, and increase difficulties in communication. With the biochemical signals changing during puberty, this can pose new challenges that may influence a student as well.

Knowing this, we can focus on trying to help the individual understand the schedule the day will follow, allowing them to predict the changes throughout the day.

Communication challenges are another core characteristic of the ASD diagnosis. Although the extent of this varies, if a child has difficulty understanding instruction or other language, they may not understand notification of a changing schedule. Among these communication barriers, many children with ASD tend to interpret language literally. Students may have difficulties in understanding complex language associated with transitions, and may interpret schedules extremely rigidly. For example, in a situation in which instructions are to work until the bell, if 5 minutes before, people begin to pack up their bags, this may be interpreted as a deviation from the expected schedule and cause distress. It is important to monitor our language and find communication methods that will be effective in supporting these students.

Lastly, difficult behaviours that may be associated with transitions, may have been reinforced over time. If previous outbursts, screaming, or other forms of resistance has led to success in delaying or preventing a change in the schedule, students may learn to repeat these behaviours to achieve these goals. This is especially prominent in situations in which a student does not want to switch from a task they enjoy. Reinforcement allows this behavior to persist, and in these cases, it may be important to speak with the parents to see if there are ways to work together in mitigating such outbursts.

In this video, we have covered how preferences in routine, communication challenges, and reinforcement of behavior may contribute to these difficulties in daily transitions. In the next topic, we will cover how visual aids can be used to help support students with ASD through these scenarios. Thank you.

Topic 2: Utilizing Visual Aids

In the previous video, we covered why children on the autism spectrum may have difficulties with transitions between activities, classes, and portions of the day. Depending on the individual, these issues may be linked with preference for routine, communication challenges, and reinforcement of these behaviours. One of the most effective ways to support individuals through transitions is to use visual tools. These can also help develop life skills and independence!



Just before we get into some examples of visual tools you can use, I want to discuss why visual tools work. Relating to communication issues, students with ASD often process visual information more efficiently than verbal information, bypassing some of the barriers in understanding spoken language. Visual presentation allows the information to be available for reference over time. Unlike verbal delivery, which once spoken is lost in time, having the same visual schedule available gives children the opportunity to continually check with the information to stay up to date. It is also more supportive of students who may need a longer time to process this information.

Using visual schedules allows us to communicate information earlier as well. By having the schedule laid-out before hand, we can give these to students earlier to allow them to work this into their own mental routine. We can make changes earlier, to allow more time for preparation, and the information may be retained better. This allows us to support the student by working with their preference for routine, not against it. Simply put, our goal is to inform them before hand of when and what changes in activities or classes will occur, so that they can prepare for these transitions.

Now that we know why visual aids can be effective, what are some tools we can implement? In this video, we have already mentioned using visual schedules. Some ways to implement this are a set of times and activities written on the white board, visuals on a calendar, illustrations with activity names and times, a handout, or even a story to outline what a typical day is like. Different strategies are more fitting for different children, and it is important to understand the individual to see what is most appropriate.

Let's walk through a quick example of preparing and using a visual schedule with illustrations. The purpose of this is to break up the major tasks and transitions in the day to allow for better understanding. The night before a school day, we might create a table with the activity name, representative pictures, and activity time for the day. Due to literal interpretations and promoting independence, it is best to only include the minimally crucial information within the schedule, when appropriate for the student.

For example, if we wanted to start the first half hour of the day with reading time, we would write down "reading," with representative images, and the time range that we want to dedicate to this. We would then repeat this for the entire day, including break times, and possibly the teacher that is instructing each class. With these time tables, we can have them available early in the day to inform students of the day ahead. If there are daily or weekly schedules that repeat, this can help build this internal routine that children with ASD prefer.

Another strategy that might be beneficial is utilizing visual prompts to signal transitions. Again, the focus of these would be to improve communication to help understanding of changes between activities. For example, a line-up prompt may be used to help signal a student with transition challenges that it is time to move on to the next activity. The bell can also be challenging as it may abruptly interrupt a student's work – it may be helpful to have the student set up a quiet alarm a few minutes before the bell, to allow time for them to begin wrapping up their task. Certain visual clocks are also available online to help see and monitor the passage of time.



Depending on the student, once the schedule is posted, deviations from the timetable may be challenging. Try your best to stay consistent, and when changes need to be made, try to communicate the change early on. It might be a good idea to demonstrate this on the visual schedule as well. This can be done by attaching a card on each schedule that represents a “surprise.” Initially, when teaching and helping the child get comfortable with the strategy, we should only include positive surprise cards, representing changes in the schedule that the child will enjoy. We can then implement neutral changes and lastly negative schedule changes when appropriate.

Thank you for watching, in the next video we will look at simplifying language.

Topic 3: Simplifying Language

As we already mentioned previously in this module, children with ASD often struggle with comprehending language. Students on the autism spectrum may take longer to process verbal information, miss subtle cues such as tone and body language, have trouble understanding complex language and interpret statements literally. In terms of transitions, difficulty in delivering information regarding when, where, and how transitions will occur, as well as, communicating during the process of transitioning, can all contribute to these behavioural challenges. However, by finding ways to modify our language, we can improve interactions and better support these individuals.

One key strategy is to simplify our language. We can combat many of the challenges in interpreting verbal information by making our language easier to understand. There are two basic methods we can utilize:

1. The first: **Speak in shorter sentences.** By being more concise and direct, there is less need for individuals to focus on deconstructing our message. This way we allow students with ASD to focus on the key information. For example, instead of saying “Get ready, we are going to go have lots of fun in Gym class today,” we could simply say “we are now going to gym class.” Sometimes, we can talk about the reinforcer present in the next activity to better motivate students, in this case: “We are now going to play soccer!”
2. The second strategy is to **speak explicitly.** As we discussed, children with ASD often interpret things literally. By speaking explicitly, we are able to construct our language the same way they understand. This involves utilizing less sarcasm, relying less on implicit statements, and utilizing fewer analogies, abstract language, or anything that requires understanding of tone. For example, sarcastically joking that “Gym is Cancelled!” when gym class is next, can confuse all students. However, children with ASD may have a particularly difficult time understanding this joke, and may also experience more stress from this confusion.

Simplifying spoken language can also be used in tandem with visual support tools to further help with communication. This may be done by simply using consistent terminology as in the visual support, or giving reminders to a student of a change in the visual schedule. Both of these are valuable for all students in the classroom.

Visual supports and simplifying language are further covered in the Instructional Communication module, and goes a little more in-depth about these techniques and



strategies. That concludes this video, and in the next one, we will discuss expectation management.

Topic 4: Expectation Management

In the last two videos, we have covered how the use of visual aids and simplified language can assist in helping students understand schedules and have easier times transitioning between activities. These skills can be very effective; however, it is also important to allow room for error for yourself.

This is not an issue that all students with ASD or all students that struggle with daily transitions experience, but may come up. Due to literal interpretations of language, absolute statements can have absolute interpretations. For example, if we tell Janey, a student with ASD, “we always line-up before going to music class,” Janey interprets this literally – every time this transition occurs, the class must line-up. However, if one day we are in a rush and choose not to do this, this may cause distress for Janey as this is not part of the routine associated with going to music class. In addition, this may negatively impact the teacher-student relationship, as Janey may perceive that you were untruthful.

This issue can similarly occur with the times set for certain activities, and can be challenging to mitigate. As we discussed earlier, trying to communicate such changes earlier may help with this, but in many situations, this may not be possible. However, we can monitor our language and communication to properly manage these expectations, preventing these situations from occurring.

One way that we might do this is to substitute absolute words like always and never, with usually and rarely. This terminology allows for exceptions, and although the difference may seem negligible, this may lead to a different interpretation of the information. For example, if we had told Janey that we “usually line-up before music class,” although Janey may still be uncomfortable with deviation from this routine, her understanding of the process might allow for this flexibility.

Another strategy that can be utilized in terms of time-based expectations, is to offer ranges. Instead of saying “work for the next 30 minutes,” we may instead tell the class to “work for the next 25-35 minutes” to give us this room for error. We can also reflect this within visual schedules, or even explicitly communicate to Janey that the listed information is subject to change. To summarize, the goal is to utilize communication to allow for some flexibility, and when possible, help the student understand that the schedule will not always be strictly followed.

As we previously discussed, using surprise cards in visual schedules and trying to only include crucial information in visual aids are also great ways to better manage expectations in a practical way.

I realize that much of the content in this video may seem vague. Expectation management can be challenging and requires understanding of the individual to properly incorporate this room for error or explicitly communicate that deviations from the schedule may occur. Thank you.

Topic 5: Developing Adaptability



So far in this module, we have covered the use of certain strategies with visual aids and communication that can help support students through daily transitions and prepare students if changes to schedules are made. However, the world is fluid, changing and adaptable – it is important that students develop mental flexibility to accommodate for this. Supporting students to develop these skills requires individualized approaches, built upon a foundation of understanding the individual and strong relationships. These skills in adaptability are challenging to teach an individual, requiring continual work and often a high level of expertise. We have talked about managing language and visual schedules to help with this, however, for these reasons, this video will be a more general discussion around this topic rather than a focus on strategies.

At the foundation of teaching these more fundamental life-skills, it is important to place understanding, empathy and relationship building at its core. We cover managing teacher-student relationships in the context of ASD in a separate module, but often students respond positively to an effort to care and get to know each student. Students with ASD, like all individuals, still want to be understood and accepted by their peers, it is important that the instructor takes the time to do this. Once a relationship of trust and respect is created, there can be opportunities to slowly build this understanding of adaptability.

In a practical sense, if you are engaging with someone who you have yet to build a trusting relationship, you are less likely to seriously consider changes to the way you live your life. The same is true for individuals with ASD, and this relationship may take a bit longer to develop than with other students.

Once this relationship is developed, let's look into some opportunities for developing these life skills. Within the classroom, once a student has had a chance to become comfortable and familiar with the daily flow, we might choose to decrease a student's reliance on support prompts. For example, it might be beneficial to purposely fade out some explicit communication of transitions or detail in visual prompts, as an experiment to see how a student reacts. We might give less warning regarding changes in the schedule to see if previously challenging behaviours re-emerge. During more stressful situations, children often become more reliant on these supportive strategies, so you may want to re-implement these during field trips, test days, substitute teacher days, and other deviations from normal routine. It is often better to reduce verbal cues associated with visual supports rather than removing the visual support. Using visual supports non-verbally helps to build generalizability and independence.

Another opportunity for explicit teaching is when these unexpected changes occur. Depending on the student, it may be valuable to talk with the student about how changes are natural, and explain the importance of adaptability. If you do choose to implement certain strategies, it may be beneficial to remind the student of strategies and teach adaptability when we observe discomfort with a situation. Another way of thinking about this, is to provide slight discomfort for the student to grow into. These skills are not learned overnight; they take continual learning and development. Depending on the day, students may be able to better manage stress associated with transitions, so do not be discouraged if there are bad days!

Through this process, it is important to keep parents up to date. Generalization across various settings and scenarios can be challenging for individuals on the autism spectrum. Children



may be more comfortable with adaptability at home or in class, and ideally our goal is to support both settings. Communication with parents allows sharing of strategies, identification of challenges in generalizations, as well as coordination between therapists, other professionals, parents, and educators to support children. This way, we can have a more holistic approach to develop these life skills with better chances of success.

Thank you for watching this video, and in our last two videos, we will work through an in-depth example with a student, Mary, and a field-trip to the museum.

Topic 6: In-Depth Example Pt 1

Hi! In this video, we will summarize the skills presented on visual supports and communication strategies through an in-depth example.

In this situation, we will be taking a 4th grade class to the museum for a field trip. In our class, we have a student, Mary, who is on the autism spectrum and is known to struggle with transitions. Before the day of the field trip, we should try and predict some of the challenging scenarios that might occur for Mary. This way, we can evaluate if we have proper support strategies in place, and can put some work into creating other resources that might help.

So, what are some considerations that we should be aware of? Probably the most obvious point of concern is that this field trip is a big change from the daily routine of the classroom. For Mary, we should realize that this may be challenging as the events in the day will be highly uncertain. Another issue is that with parent volunteers, Mary may be introduced to new people, with whom she may be uncomfortable. Lastly, field trips can be chaotic, making it difficult to stick to an itinerary – this is an area where communication skills can be very valuable.

Let's take a look at some things that we can do before the field trip to help Mary prepare. To address the primary issue of this large deviation from the daily classroom routine, we would want to continually remind Mary that the field trip would occur. In addition, we should focus on helping Mary understand the schedule of the day so that she may mentally prepare. Visual supports can be great for this, whether this be a timetable, visual schedule, or story. Visual stories can be tedious to construct but can also be extremely valuable. We might be able to get help from Mary's parents with creating this. Let's take a look at how we might do this.

If our schedule is listed as below:

Time	Activity
9:00 – 9:30	Bus to museum
9:30 – 10:00	Register and organize into groups
10:00 – 11:00	Presentation from Museum
11:00 – 12:00	Tour part 1
12:00 – 12:30 Etc.	Lunch Etc.

We can take each element and create a panel, similar to a comic book to help visual communication, and show transitions between these. For example, let's focus on the presentation from museum and transition to "Tour Part 1." We can have a pictorial representation of a presentation, and write below "The class will have a presentation from the



museum. The presentation is scheduled between 10:00am and 11:00am, but the time may change.” We should try to maintain present tense to avoid confusion.

Next, we can show a panel showing students in groups with their field-trip leader. The caption may be “after the presentation, the class gathers into their groups.” Next we can show a representation of how they will walk to the first exhibit. “Each group lines up and goes to their first exhibit!” Or we could be even more simple, “groups”, “exhibits” to increase adaptability, if appropriate for the child.

After this, the next section of the story might be the first part of the tour. In this section, we might show a picture of students looking at the exhibit. “At the first exhibit, the students learned about dinosaurs. No touching was allowed on the exhibits!” This would then be followed by the transitional stories that we talked about earlier. Remember, it is important to use cartoons or illustrations, over pictures.

As a teacher, we or the parents would work to finish creating this story, so that Mary can familiarize herself with the itinerary of the fieldtrip before the day. This can be very helpful in allowing Mary to combat the uncertainty around the day, and provide organization to decrease stress. She can carry this story with her during the field trip to follow along and reference during the day as well. In addition, it is helpful to give Mary the group assignments prior to the fieldtrip. The story or visual schedule can help Mary understand the when, what and where of the fieldtrip, and the group assignments clarifies who she will be spending the day with. But make sure you work in some adaptability to accommodate possible absences.

On the topic of who Mary will be spending the day with, one of the other concerns that we had was the unfamiliar parent-volunteers she would be introduced to. In an ideal scenario, we would hope to have one of her parents attend the fieldtrip, however, this is not always possible. In these cases, we should make an effort to have Mary in our own student group or with a teacher or educational assistant that is both familiar with Mary and the support strategies utilized. Regardless of the preparation, if Mary is not supervised by the proper individual, she may not have the support necessary to manage the stress associated with this day.

Now that we have covered some ways we can help plan and prepare the fieldtrip to help support Mary, lets conclude this video. In the next one, we will look into what we can do during the fieldtrip. Thank you!

Topic 7: In-Depth Example Pt 2

In the last video, we covered some ways that we can support Mary, a student with ASD, for a fieldtrip to the museum through preparation. In this video, we will look at using communication skills to help during the fieldtrip.

Previously, we covered three areas of consideration for this fieldtrip: the deviation from the classroom routine, un-familiar parent volunteers, and the chaotic nature of fieldtrips. Let’s take a look at utilizing communication skills to manage this last area of concern.

Although we have provided Mary with the itinerary, due to the busy nature of fieldtrips, these schedules are difficult to follow exactly. It can be advantageous to use the visual schedule to allow for these changes. For example, in the visual story we wrote “The presentation is



scheduled between 10:00am and 11:00am, but the time may change.” Knowing that Mary has challenges with transitions, we should also make an extra effort to stick to the schedule when it is under our control.

In terms of communication, especially through a noisy and distracting environment, utilizing simple language is very important! We should avoid using any analogies, metaphors, sarcasm or puns that might confuse Mary, especially if they are in relation to the activities or schedule for the fieldtrip.

We should also try to use terminology that matches the visual schedule. This would mean referring to “presentation from the museum” as “presentation from the museum” instead of “talk from Kate from the museum.” This way, we can more effectively utilize the visual aid, but also provide clearer communication. Another method to work around this would be to teach that phrases mean the same thing. This is more challenging to do, but helps the student develop flexibility.

Before transitions, we likely want to give Mary warnings prior to wrapping up activities. This gives her time to disengage from a task, and make sure none of these transitions catch her by surprise or interrupt her from something she is interested in.

It may also be valuable to utilize prompting tools. For example, we can teach the class that a hand raised as a fist means to get together in your group and prepare to go to the next exhibit. This way, we can also incorporate a visual aid to signal and communicate with Mary and the class.

Through consistency with the prepared material, simplified language, providing warnings, and possibly visual aids, hopefully, we can ensure that a potentially stressful trip to the museum can be fun and informative.

In this module, we discussed why children with ASD may struggle with transitions, and looked into strategies to help with this. These included different visual aids and simplifying language. We also looked into ways to manage expectations and promote understanding of adaptable schedules. There are other strategies available as well, so please look for other tools if these ones do not work for you. By maintaining our principles in using empathy, understanding the individual, and practicing patience, I am confident you will be able to find the right balance for you and your students.

Thank you for watching! Hope you enjoyed watching these videos as much as we did making them. Feel free to contact us with any comments or questions you may have.

